



The Cover Story by GennyWrites57

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Summary: Robin has a problem: she's been outed to her parents. They're threatening to send her away from Hawkins, but Steve Harrington has a plan. Can the two of them fake being a perfect couple long enough for her mom and dad to stand down? Meanwhile, a mysterious young woman comes to town, claiming she's searching for her sister. Eventual Robin/Kali. Cute Dustin/Suzie bonus subplot.

1. Chapter One: The Best-Laid Plans

Trigger warning: This fanfiction contains mentions of homophobic behavior that was, unfortunately, prevalent during the time period in which Stranger Things is set. The author does not condone this behavior, and wishes to inform you that if certain plot points in this fic pertaining to homophobia are triggering to you, this may not be the story for you. Your mental health matters, please take care of yourself. 3

Certainly not for the first time this summer, Steve Harrington was royally pissed off.

He supposed "humiliated" would be putting it more accurately, but he didn't want to think of it that way anymore. Not when it seemed that his summer had thus far been one long string of other humiliations, failures, and otherwise life-threatening scenarios.

Well, this was no thousand-mile trek through an underground Russian secret base buried far beneath a sprawling town mall, but Jennifer Burns and her gaggle of *gal pals* laughing right in his face definitely seemed just as miserable right now.

Their laughter, of course, was the result of another failed attempt at flirtation from behind the desk at Hawkins Family Video. He and Robin had made a bit of a game out of picking up girls, an old homage to a pastime they'd shared at Scoops Ahoy, before everything had gone to hell in a handbasket. Jennifer had been a junior Steve's senior year; they'd briefly flirted with the idea of dating once upon a time, but had eventually lost interest in one another. He'd always been under the impression that things had ended amicably between them, as they had no real history to begin with. He'd always liked Jennifer, too — pretty girl, with cascades of wavy red hair and a round, cherubic face, and a sweet personality to match it.

Steve guessed he must've said something really stupid, to get her to laugh at him the way that she did. When did picking up girls get so hard?

He could remember a time in his high school days when girls like Jennifer would have practically fallen over themselves for just a *chance* that he might talk to them, notice them someday. Looking back, he wasn't the proudest of the sort of guy he'd been back then — *a royal douchebag*, as Robin was often quick to teasingly remind him — but he'd be an idiot and a liar if he said that he didn't sometimes miss the influence that came with his reputation.

Maybe that made him pathetic, stuck in the past, unable to move on to better things. He thought of Wayne Davis, a former Hawkins High football star, aging washed-up quarterback now turned cashier at the local grocery store, beer gut protruding from beneath his work apron. Sometimes the guy even still tried to squeeze himself into his old letterman jacket, either deliberately ignoring or completely blind to the fact that his strong high school body had gone to seed. Was that what Steve himself was fated to someday become?

And when exactly had *that* happened?

Sure, he guessed he could have gotten into college. Could have tried harder, studied more, gotten his head out of his ass and stuck to the grindstone rather than the parties that had made him so "famous" in school. Christ, it seemed so *petty*, such a small thing to worry about now that he looked back on it — *popularity*, being worshipped by the other snot-nosed little shits that he went to school with. How had he let *that* take priority over his future?

If it weren't so frustrating, he might've found it almost funny. Steve snorted to himself, the sound bitter and without humor. His *future*? Now he sounded just like Nancy.

Jesus, what was *with* him lately?

As Jennifer and her friends left the video store, leaving the last refrains of their tinkling laughter and traces of Dior perfume in their wake, Steve sneered, swiping a hand angrily through his carefully-tousled hair.

"Do you believe that?" he sighed as Robin strode up to the counter from the back, a precarious tower of VHS tapes stacked in her arms. "I don't know what the hell's my problem. I feel just like that guy they

taught us about in my mom's Bible study class that one time, Samuel — you know, he used to be strong and super hot, but then that chick cut his hair while he slept, and he turned weak."

"You mean Sampson," Robin corrected in her usual deadpan. "Sampson and Delilah."

Steve shrugged. "Yeah, whatever," he said waspishly, but even he couldn't bring himself to be completely irritated at her correction. "I don't get it, man," he mused, half to himself, half to anyone who would bother to listen. "I know I'm not the smartest guy around or anything, but that doesn't mean I deserve to be alone *forever*, right?"

"Mm," was Robin's monosyllabic, disinterested response.

Either not catching her lack of engagement with the conversation or not truly caring too much, Steve pressed on, "Even Henderson's got a girlfriend! And *I'm* the one who gave him advice on how to get girls in the first place! I mean, how is *that* fair? Yeah, sure," he muttered, now keenly aware that he was babbling as he set about returning rental videos to their proper spots in the aisles of the store, "I shouldn't want a girlfriend just for the sake of having one. I should date someone who's interesting and cool. But still! It'd be nice to, y'know, not have to do all the work all the time just to get the time of day from anybody."

"Yeah," said Robin dispassionately.

Only then did it even occur to Steve that perhaps Robin hadn't even been listening to him this whole time. Folding his arms across his chest and biting back an exasperated sigh — it was an effort not to roll his eyes — he instead said, "Yeah, so that's why I've decided to take up drag performing. Just for the hell of it, you know. Oh, and also, I didn't want to tell you this, but I'm sleeping with your mom."

"Mhm, yeah, that sucks."

"Hey! Earth to Robin! I've been talking to you for like, five minutes," Steve cried at last. "Were you even listening?"

A crooked grin tugged at the corners of his mouth and the beginnings

of a laugh escaped his parted lips. Knowing their playfully cajoling relationship, the way that they traded insults as if they were compliments and dealt solely in sarcasm with one another, he was expecting a cheerfully snarky response from her, a smirk and maybe a joke that would lift his spirits and help take his mind off dumb Jennifer and her dumb friends.

What he hadn't anticipated was for her to wheel quickly around, genuine anger and hurt in her eyes as she looked up at him. Her gaze was breathtakingly sharp; he'd always said that he would hate to ever really be on Robin's bad side, and now he knew exactly why. There was a pain written there on her face that seemed to pin him right to the spot. What had he done *now*? He didn't *think* that he'd said something else stupid. But then again, he did seem to have a particular gift when it came to unintentionally offending and angering women.

"You want to know what your *problem* is, Dingus?" she said hotly, her usual nickname for him falling from her lips with baffling venom and contempt. "You are literally a repellant for women because it doesn't ever occur to you that we might have other things occupying our minds besides just *you* and your problems. You obsess over your image and *constantly* need women to validate you. But you know what? You *have* to realize that not every kind woman is a rehab facility for your damaged, stunted emotions, Harrington."

Steve flinched back from the bare harshness of her words, doing his best to keep how wounded he truly felt from showing on his face. Then she really *would* think he was a pathetic, whiny son of a bitch. As far as he could recall, he didn't think that he and Robin had ever genuinely argued with one another. They'd teased and snipped and maybe occasionally bickered over silly things like how many scoops of ice cream an order was supposed to get, but never anything that would threaten their slowly budding friendship. And it was *nice*, Steve had to admit, to have a girl in his life that he valued on a purely platonic level, to have someone in his life who just really enjoyed his company, and for neither of them to want or expect anything from one another. If he'd done something to risk that, he certainly did hate it; the last thing he'd ever want would be to appear insensitive to her.

His first thought, incidentally, was, *Whoa, is she PMSing or something?* But in a stroke of rare genius, he didn't dare voice that thought to her aloud, not with her staring daggers at him like that. Robin had never been the moody sort; she'd always had a snarky sensibility about her, but had always seemed so unfazed by life around her, so unshakable. It was disorienting and bewildering to see her so visibly shaken now — a stark reminder that, for all their pretending not to care, she did have feelings, too, and perhaps he'd done something to injure them.

Steve's facial expression softened somewhat, and with a baffled shake of his head, he stammered, "Whoa — I, uh — I'm sorry, look, I didn't mean anything by —"

"Forget it," she muttered.

"Hey hey hey — wait — Robin—!"

He didn't even get to finish his sentence before the bell atop the store's front door jingled, the sound jarringly cheery for their current conversation. His attention stolen by the customer striding up to the counter, Steve was forced to look away as Robin turned abruptly on her heel, stalking off to the opposite corner of the store.

For the rest of the day, Steve and Robin worked alongside one another in stiff, uncomfortable silence. Whenever talking became necessary for work-related tasks, they exchanged minimal words, and the few that they did were tense and strained. Steve might have cringed from the desperate, apologetic tone his voice had begun to take as the day had gone by, but even he at some point decided to swallow his pride and just go with it. Tough and carefree as he pretended to be on the outside, the truth was that he loathed conflict, and whenever he felt as if he might have even accidentally wronged someone, he wanted to do what he could to make it right.

That was what he was best at, wasn't it? Fixing things after he'd gone and monumentally screwed it all up.

Closing up the store for the night was an awkward affair in itself. Keith loomed over their shoulders like an ominous, body-odor-plagued shadow, his presence made even worse than usual by the

fact that he seemed to catch on that something weird was in the air. He kept exchanging shifty, weaselly glances between Steve and Robin all the while, the gears in his head visibly turning as he tried to figure out what had happened in his absence. Robin never said anything to their boss, though, and Steve wisely avoided mentioning it. They worked uncharacteristically quietly, if not methodically, and at last, the two of them left the video store. As they locked the front door, Steve couldn't help but hope that the day's unfortunate events would be locked in there with the rest of the videos, and that all those negative feelings would suffocate in there overnight, and tomorrow would be a new day.

Still, damn him, he couldn't just let the matter lie at that.

On their way out to the parking lot, Steve quickened his stride. With his long legs, he matched Robin's pace in no time, and soon enough, he tentatively rested his arm upon her shoulder. "Hey," he said, hoping that he sounded a lot braver than he felt. "About earlier — listen, Robin, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or anything — if I said something dumb — "

Robin turned to face him, and relief uncoiled like a viper writhing in his stomach when he realized that there was none of her previous fury written on her features this time around. Still, she looked absolutely exhausted — it was the face of someone who had been carrying around a heavy burden on their shoulders all day, and still hadn't gotten the chance to lay it down. The familiar mischief and intelligent twinkle in her eyes was replaced by an incredible weariness. He couldn't help but wonder when was the last time she'd gotten a decent night's sleep.

"It's fine," she said, her voice a dull, flat drone, one that suggested that everything was, in fact, definitely *not fine*. "Look, Steve, I'm sorry I lost my temper. You didn't do anything wrong. I'm just — " she paused, seeming to search for the words, "— tired."

Steve arched his eyebrows, instantly dubious. He might not consider himself the smartest person around, but you didn't need booksmarts to know a lie when you see one, and that one was just about as obvious as it got. "Yeah, totally," he said, forcing himself to give a nonchalant shrug. "Uh, sorry again. We're cool, then?"

Robin expelled a harsh sigh, raking her fingers through her short hair. "I said it's *fine*, Steve," she said again, urgency giving her already strained voice a razor's edge. "Listen, I appreciate your concern and everything, but we're okay, so can you *please* just drop it and forget about it?"

For a moment, Steve teetered awkwardly in place, his mouth opening and closing repeatedly like some kind of dumbfounded catfish. There was so much he wanted to say, so many questions he wanted to ask just to make sure his friend really was going to be alright, but they wouldn't come to him. Those words tasted like weakness on his lips, brought with them an uncomfortable level of vulnerability that he wasn't sure he was quite ready for yet.

He wasn't given long to debate on it, anyway. Before he could say anything, Robin began to turn towards her car.

But this time, he wasn't going to make the mistake of letting her walk away. Clearly, something was weighing on her, and whether it made him an idiot or a hero didn't matter, he just wanted to get to the bottom of it, maybe even help if he could. *Might be nice*, he thought, *to feel useful to somebody*.

"Waitwaitwait," he said, catching her attention one last time. His tone of voice was uncharacteristically soft, maybe even close to *caring* as he asked, "You sure you're okay? You can . . . y'know, you can talk to me about it if you need to."

Silence spanned between them, during which Robin genuinely seemed to consider his words. Her gaze roved over him, thoughtful, analytical as ever; she pursed her lips, cocking her head slightly to the side. The quiet lasted for so long that Steve almost began to wonder if she was just screwing with him, if she was waiting for him to leave. Just when he was starting to think he'd be better off just going to his own car and heading home, Robin drew a slow, deep breath, holding his gaze. Then, wordlessly, she walked over to her car, put in the key, and wrenched open the passenger door.

"Get in," she said.

Steve blinked, nonplussed. After a moment's pause, though, he

realized she was serious, and slowly, awkwardly clambered into the vehicle.

When Robin had walked around and slid into the seat on the driver's side, the finality of the door slamming shut behind them gave off an air of bizarre seriousness. "You're not tricking me into coming in here so you can take me out to a field and murder me, are you?" Steve joked, making a valiant effort to diffuse the tension. Still, he was the only one laughing at his own joke, and after a moment, his chuckles trailed off and died entirely.

So he cleared his throat, ready to hear Robin out. He stared across at her, not entirely sure what he would find in her facial expression. When she turned to look at him at last, though, he was surprised and shaken to his core to find that her dark eyes were awash with unshed tears.

"Whoa — hey," he said, his tone hushed with shock. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

The words rushed out of her without any sort of preamble, as if she had been holding them in all day, but they'd made her so sick that she just had to purge them from her body, had to get them out into the open somehow: "My parents know." Fear, cold, stark fear, was etched all over her soft, ovaline face.

All Steve could do was stare back at her, baffled by the revelation. Hoping that he didn't sound too insensitive, he prodded, "Wait — know? What do you mean? Know what?"

In a comfortingly familiar, typical Robin gesture, she gave him a raised-eyebrows, *I-can't-believe-you-seriously-just-asked-me-that* look. "What do you think, Dingus?" she prompted, though there was nothing of her earlier malice and frustration in her voice now, only hollow exhaustion. "They know about . . . *me*. About what I told you. Remember? In the bathroom at the mall?"

How could he forget? Though they'd both spent much of the night in a drug-addled haze, the effects of the Russians' serum had started to ebb when she'd revealed that particular truth to him. The smell of their own vomit mixed with the smell of public bathroom cleaning

supplies still tinged his nostrils at the memory. They'd sat together, there on that grimy floor, and each confessed parts of themselves they probably hadn't told very many — if *any* — other people at all. All that time, he'd thought that Robin had been another one of those dewy-eyed girls, clinging to a romanticized view of Steve "The Hair" Harrington, when in reality, she'd been jealous, had craved his popularity and influence because the one girl she'd truly wanted hadn't had eyes for anyone but him.

It seemed so terribly unfair, the more he thought about it from Robin's perspective.

"Oh, shit," he breathed at last, his eyes wide and incredulous as he looked back at her. "How'd they find out? What did they say about it?"

Robin gave a watery, thick scoff, the tears now spilling quietly down her cheeks. Quickly, as if to hide such a vulnerable moment, she swiped at her eyes and said bitterly, "Well, as you can imagine, they weren't exactly *thrilled* with the news." Her voice sounded stuffed up, and she gave a great sniffle; one would have thought she were suffering a head cold, not crying. Next moment, though, the words were leaving her mouth in one giant torrent, a wave washing over them both. "A couple nights ago, me and some girl friends got trashed at a party. Ellen Lambert and I were really hitting it off, so I thought, you know, why not go for it? And — and — ugh, I don't know, we kissed, and I guess she got scared, 'cause she called my house last night and told my mom and dad everything. Said that *I* made a move on *her*, and that she had nothing to do with it."

Anger lanced through Steve like a hot, spiky arrow. He'd always known Ellen Lambert to be a bit of a gossip, but to seriously stoop *that* low? That dirty, lying, cowardly —

Huffing furiously, Steve slid his fingers through the waves of hair at his temple, shaking his head in a mix of bemusement and protective rage. "Shit," he said again. "*Shit*."

Robin gave a dry, brittle laugh. "Yeah, I heard you the first time. But I agree."

"Well, what, what're you gonna do, then?" he sputtered. "Robin, I'm so sorry — what a — she's such a — that bitch!"

"I'm sure she was just afraid," sighed Robin with a shake of her own head. "She didn't want anyone finding out that she might be . . . y'know, into girls, like me. So she made me out to be the big scary boogeyman instead, for an alibi. I guess I shouldn't take it personally," she muttered darkly, even as she wiped more tears away from her eyes.

Steve couldn't believe his ears. "Are you seriously making excuses for the chick who ratted you out to your mom and dad?"

Leaning back in her already-reclined driver's seat, she answered, "I guess . . . I'm just trying to make sense of all this. It kind of hurts less if I have a *why*, you know?"

Well, *that* was a feeling he knew all too well. He could recall all too vividly the way that it had felt when he and Nancy had broken up; it was exactly the kind of heartbreak he'd only thought existed in movies, all that lovesickness and pining and stuff like that. He'd had such a comfortable life, had been so happy with her by his side, and in an instant, he'd found out that she hardly felt the same way for him at all. In the aftermath of that messy separation, he'd often found himself wondering why, trying to reason with what had happened, trying to figure out if there were any way he might mend things. But sometimes, unfortunately, things were just a little *too* messy to repair properly. They might eventually right themselves, but they'd never be the same well-oiled machine they once were.

"Yeah," he said at last. "Yeah, I get that." Another lengthy, heavy pause, and then: "Hey, so . . . what're you going to do? About all this, I mean? Are your mom and dad going to, like, ground you or something?"

Robin gave that same quaky, humorless laugh as before. "Yeah, I *wish* they'd ground me compared to this," she said. "They're talking about making me go away. Leave Hawkins, and go to some all-girl Christian boarding school or something. They want me to see therapists, and . . . and *cure* me."

Only now did it occur to him that perhaps the true severity of the situation was entirely lost on him, as he'd never had to deal with such things before. Cure her? But there was nothing wrong with Robin to begin with! They made it sound like she had a sickness or something, when really it wasn't a big deal at all. Sure, he'd never exactly hung out with many gay people before, but that didn't mean they didn't exist, he guessed. Maybe at one point in time, he'd been an intolerant little shit, but he supposed beating down Demogorgons with spiked baseball bats and killing a giant monster made of human goo with fireworks would be enough to help expand anyone's worldview a little bit.

"Wait a minute," said Steve at last, holding his hand in the air. "So you're telling me they want to *cure* you . . . by sending you to a school with *only* girls? *Year-round*?"

There was a beat of silence, and then, as his words sank in, Robin burst into immediate, gut-busting laughter, tilting her head back and clutching at her stomach. Unable to help himself, thoroughly relieved that this time's attempt to cheer her up had worked, Steve found himself soon joining in. Pretty soon the car was filled with their gasping laughter, and Robin clutched at his hand, probably the only friendly gesture she'd shared with anybody all day, given last night's circumstances for her. The two of them had never been touchy-feely, not in the way that other friends were, but he wouldn't begrudge her a little affection, not when life had cut her such a rough deal within the last couple days.

"Yeah," she gasped at last in between giggles. As her laughs died down, she sighed and said, "Yeah, it does sound pretty stupid when you put it that way, huh?"

Steve laughed, but the sound trailed off as he caught sight of their hands, still clasped together, Robin clutching his as if she were holding on for dear life. The image was enough to get the wheels in his head turning — the beginnings of an idea, crazy as it still sounded to him, were just starting to pull together and take shape. If there were some way, any way, to get Robin's parents to back off and not send her away . . . if they could somehow fool them into thinking that it was all some kind of misunderstanding . . .

"Hey," he said, perking up at last. Freeing his hand from hers, he gave her shoulder a little jostle. "Hey, Robin. Listen, I think I have an idea — a way I can help you, if you want."

Giving him a quizzical look, Robin shook her head and answered, "What do you mean, an *idea*? Don't your ideas all usually devolve into total chaos? And besides, what'm I gonna tell my parents? That I just *decided* to not be a lesbian anymore?"

"Well, if they're dumb enough to believe that you can be cured, then they've gotta buy *that* excuse, right? But look, you'll need a cover — someone you can show to them, to prove that you're . . . uh . . . " he wasn't sure what word he was supposed to use here.

"Normal?" Robin prompted dryly.

"No," said Steve decisively, "no, I wasn't gonna say that. I just mean, you'll need to trick them into thinking you like guys instead. And to do that, you'll need . . . "

"A boyfriend," she finished. "A fake boyfriend." Slowly, she lifted her gaze to him, as if it at last had dawned on her exactly what he was implying.

"Yeah," he answered gravely. "And since I'm *definitely* not seeing anybody right now, and I'm the only one — I think — who knows about this, then I guess that makes me the prime candidate." Sticking out his hand, he added, "So what do you say? We do make a pretty good team, right?"

For a moment, she hesitated. In the awful, suspenseful silence that followed, Steve prepared himself to make more profuse apologies, to keep from screwing up their friendship even more than he already —

But then she reached forward. And Robin slowly, firmly, shook his hand.

2. Chapter Two: The Rumor

Where the interstate gave way to winding pavement littered with potholes, where the city skylines melted into miles of endless, dense thickets of trees, an old, rusty car sped down the road.

To any onlookers, the driver might have appeared just as inconsequential as anyone else. A young woman, with thick, dark hair pulled back into an effortlessly messy ponytail, clad in a leather jacket and well-worn blue jeans. The deep brown eyes that remained centered on the road hid behind a pair of broad sunglasses, good for blocking out the merciless summer sunshine. Sleek, catlike swipes of kohl lined her eyes. Her hands that gripped the steering wheel were calloused, but her fingernails were kept long and rounded off at the ends, painted with a glossy black sheen. And on the inside of her wrist, a small, seemingly innocuous tattoo of a number: 008.

Just another crazy teenager, adults might have assumed, drawn in by the latest fads and crazes. They'd perhaps give her appearance a few quizzical — if judgmental — stares, perhaps talk amongst themselves and try to figure out exactly what she was trying to accomplish by dressing in such a way. But eventually they'd conclude that they supposed they were just more behind the times than they thought, and brush the matter off as another event to add to their ever-approaching midlife crises.

But there was something about this driver, something that marked her as decidedly different than just another face in the crowd, another wild, rebellious young person seeking to assert themselves as an individual.

In the distance, breaking the monotony of road and forest and more road, a sign loomed. Though she knew what it would say — what else could possibly be this far out in the middle of nowhere, after all? — she found herself leaning forward eagerly in her seat, nonetheless. Countless miles had been devoted to this journey, and now it seemed that she was approaching her destination at last.

Welcome to Hawkins, the sign read.

As if it had simply bloomed into existence from nothing, a vivid orange butterfly fluttered through the air in her car, and perched itself lightly onto her shoulder.

"I think," joked Steve Harrington as he slid into a booth at the far end of the diner, "this is the first time I've seen you wearing anything that isn't a work uniform."

Plopping unceremoniously into the seat across from him, Robin gave him a winning, toothy smile. "Eat your heart out, Harrington," she snarked, and while on any other day he might have been compelled to roll his eyes, today he was simply happy to see her in much better spirits.

And, to her credit, she did look nice. Though she wore only a soft, olive green tee shirt, a pair of brown shorts, and sneakers, something about her looked infinitely more comfortable and at ease when you took away the name tag and company-imposed dress code. He had to admit, there was something terribly interesting about getting to see her outside of Family Video or Scoops Ahoy, to get the chance to start to piece together little things that made her who she was. It occurred to him that, even with all that they'd experienced together, he still had never really gotten many glimpses into the more detailed facets of her personality. Did he even know what her favorite color was?

Making a mental note to ask her about it later, Steve glanced around the tiny, modest restaurant and said, "Geez, this place is busy. I didn't even know there were this many people *in* Hawkins. You sure this food'll be worth the wait?"

Robin looked incredulous. "You've *never* been to a Waffle House before?" An amazed little grin was already making its way across her freckled face.

He didn't know why her bewilderment was so embarrassing. She'd said it in the same tone someone might say the phrase, "*You're still a virgin?*" No matter how inconsequential it was, he still found his shoulders stiffening, still felt that primal defensiveness rising up from the pit of his stomach. Perhaps it was just a residual effect left over

from when he'd been one of the biggest party animals at Hawkins High, but from deep within him, that need to prove himself that had been lying dormant all this time began to awaken. "Hey, easy," he said. "Excuse me for not being all that passionate about breakfast food."

"You don't know what you're missing out on," she said, with that same teasing grin. "It's not just a Waffle House — it's a waffle *home*."

"Ugh, gross," Steve replied with a wrinkle of his nose, "how much are they paying you for the endorsements?"

Without missing a beat, Robin answered, "With any luck, enough for me to save up so I don't have to work for Keith anymore."

She chuckled at her own joke, and even Steve couldn't help huffing a breath of laughter through his nose as he studiously examined the menu. The time for breakfast food, he had protested vociferously the entire way here, had long since passed; it was now well into the afternoon, energetic shafts of golden sunlight slicing knife-sharp through the windows and spilling into the restaurant. The heat today was more brutal than it had been all summer. Even sitting in a booth under a vent with the air blasting onto them from above did little to offer them reprieve. The thought of consuming heavy food like waffles or toast caked in butter when it was so hot out made his stomach do a weak little somersault within him.

Still, Robin had insisted. And after the night she'd had yesterday, something told him that he ought to begrudge her some cheap not-really-breakfast-breakfast.

And he supposed this little outing of theirs was for more than just a good meal. Before leaving the video store last night, they'd made plans to meet up and discuss the details of the scheme they'd concocted together. While they had a broad idea, more or less, of what they were doing, there still remained the minutiae to be worked out and properly structured. As idiotic as Robin's intolerant parents (at least, in his view) seemed to be, they still needed a firm idea of where they were going with this. If they were to be believed, then they could leave no stone unturned in the way of details.

Just as Steve started to broach the sensitive subject they were supposed to discuss here today, the waitress came around to their table. *Pretty girl*, he couldn't help but think, around his and Robin's age, with dark, voluminous hair swept into feathered layers. She gave them both a toothy grin that didn't quite reach her eyes, a look that clearly said she'd been working for hours already and was starting to succumb to exhaustion, and hurriedly took their orders. Robin got a waffle ("smothered with butter, please," she'd told the waitress) and Steve ended up deciding on a plate of eggs, bacon, and hash browns.

"Here I thought you were trying to stay in shape," Robin teased as the server walked away, a wry smile curving up at the corners of her full mouth.

"Hey," he said, "they're proteins. I gotta bulk." He was just lucky that Dustin wasn't here to witness this embarrassment.

Once again, he studied the wolfish grin on her face and found himself thinking of the stark contrast between the Robin sitting across from him now, and the frightened, lonely girl he'd comforted in her car last night. She seemed an entirely different person, back to her usual quips and unflappable calm. So much so, in fact, that he almost questioned whether or not he'd just imagined everything last night. She'd been *crying* openly in front of him, crossing a boundary that neither of them had even toed the line around before. Even when they thought they'd meet their untimely end at the hands of evil Russians, she'd laughed, actually had the audacity to *laugh* in the face of it all. So for all this to have shaken her so deeply . . . he knew it really was serious.

The only thing was, how did he go about comforting her now? To say that he'd never dealt with this kind of thing before would be the understatement of the year. In fact, he thought shamefully, he'd once been the very sort of person who might have — albeit in much less severe ways — perpetuated the kind of behavior that clearly made Robin's life more difficult. He'd changed since then, he supposed, a lot more than he might've ever thought himself capable of; but that didn't keep him from feeling completely unequipped and useless. All he wanted to do was help — that much, he guessed, would probably be a welcome change from how he usually managed to screw everything up.

"Listen," he finally decided on saying, not sure if the words would help, but at least venturing to try. "Are you, y'know . . . are you doing okay? Your mom and dad haven't said anything else to you about everything, have they?"

To her credit, Robin looked relatively unruffled at the mention of such a sensitive issue. With an artless shrug of her shoulders, she folded her arms unceremoniously across her chest and reclined back in her creaky, well-worn seat. "Not yet, no. It's actually really weird — it kind of seems like they're trying to pretend I don't even exist, if that makes sense. Like, they *have* a child named Robin, yes, but she's just at band camp or something and they're waiting for her to come back . . . and meanwhile, I'm just this *thing* taking up space with them that they don't talk about." There was a short pause, during which Steve almost thought she didn't want to talk about it anymore, before she added, "I guess it's easier on them that way."

Easier on them? Steve couldn't help but think. Screw that. *They* weren't the ones who were facing being ostracized or worse just for something they couldn't really change. Steve admittedly didn't know a lot about this kind of thing — he could thank the crowd he chose to ally himself with in high school for that messed-up way of thinking — but it seemed to him that if it really put her through so much, she wouldn't *choose* to put herself in a position of being bullied or shunned by her own parents. And besides, Robin was a great friend — smart, kind (when she wanted to be) and funny as hell. Why wouldn't her mom and dad want her to just live the life that made her happiest, without having to alter some fundamental part of herself?

All misgivings aside, though, he did understand her metaphor. All too well, actually. His dad, the grade-A asshole, was a champ at employing the silent treatment when things weren't entirely within his control. When Steve was a kid, the quiet had torn into him, agonized him, but now as an adult, he could only hope that he never fell into the same trap of using it as a "get my way" card with others.

"Well, hey, if they're not even gonna talk to you over something like that, then that's their loss," he said, and found that his words were genuine.

Robin arched her eyebrows, quipping amusedly, "Says the guy who never so much as breathed in my direction the whole time we went to school together."

"I mean — yeah!" said Steve, raking a hand through his hair. "And, you know — that's what I'm saying. That was really shitty of me, Robin. I acted like an asshole, and I ended up regretting it." Regretting a *lot* of terrible things he'd done, if he were being entirely honest. Drawing a slow breath, swallowing past his own pride and allowing himself to be vulnerable for a moment, he spoke again, this time with a decidedly softer tone. "And if your parents have any brains at all, they will too."

The longer he spent outside of his little high school bubble, the more he began to realize how unfair it was that good people, *really* good people like Dustin and Robin, and even Nancy, so often got the short end of society's stick. If he could help Robin out with this — if he could somehow fix a situation that had gone so bad so fast — maybe he would actually be able to do something *right* for a change.

As if catching on to his sincerity, the tiniest of smiles twitched into place for a moment at the corner of her mouth. "Yeah," she said. "I guess you're right."

Before they could say anything more on the subject, the waitress returned to the table, presenting them with two plates piled high with food. Smoke curled from the plates in long, wispy tendrils — for a moment, Steve had to suppress a full-body shudder, his mind immediately going to the image of the Mindflyer's long tentacled legs, reaching into peoples' bodies, stealing their own souls from them . . .

Nope, nope — don't think about that, he firmly told himself, fighting back a grimace at the stomach-churning memory. Where in the world had *that* thought come from? Just when he thought he'd finally banished the most terrifying parts of his summer from his mind, suddenly he felt ashen-mouthed, and none too keen on eating.

He must not have succeeded in hiding his facial expression. A quizzical look on her face, Robin said, "Whoa. Steve. You okay?"

Snapping to attention, Steve jolted and looked back up at her. "Huh?"

"Are you okay? Your eyes were glazed over there for a second."

"Uhhhh," was his articulate response, "yeah. Yeah, I'm fine, sorry."

If she were suspicious of his reply, Robin certainly didn't say so. Though she furrowed her brows for a moment, looking as if she wanted to press the matter further, she must have decided against it. The two of them dug into their meals — Steve doing his best all the while to do more than just shift the food around on his plate, now that he'd lost his appetite — and the conversation turned once again to their dilemma at hand.

"So," Robin said, around a mouthful of waffle. (The waitress had definitely done a good job fulfilling her request for lots of butter.) When she'd successfully managed to chew and swallow her food, she continued, "I was thinking, we probably need to work on building up our story."

"Story?"

"Uh, *yeah*, Dingus," said Robin with a laugh, her tone decidedly more lighthearted than it had been last night. "You know, for the con we're about to pull on my parents. They're shortsighted, yeah, but they're not going to buy just any old thing. We've gotta make this lie count if we're really going to go through with it."

He had to admit, she was right about that much. And if he were being honest, that was the part that freaked him out the most. He'd been impulsive, thoughtless, when he'd proposed this idea to her, without taking into consideration just how much it was going to take from both of them to keep the cover story afloat for as long as possible. Of course he still wanted to follow through and help her as much as he could, but . . . could they really pull this off and create the perfect, airtight backstory for all this? Wouldn't her mom and dad see right through them? Only now, in the light of day, did it all seem implausible.

I, um . . . " he began, sheepishly massaging the back of his neck, "I guess I didn't really think that far ahead yet."

He'd been expecting her usual gruff, annoyed response, but on the contrary, Robin looked delighted. "Yeah, I figured you wouldn't," she said, a touch smugly, though he couldn't exactly fault her for her confidence. "That's why I got a head start on thinking up something myself."

Only then did he take notice of the small backpack that she'd brought with her into the restaurant. Zipping it open from where it was seated next to her in the booth, she retrieved from its depths a rather battered-looking spiral notebook. For a few moments, she flipped through its contents — as the pages blurred past, Steve thought he could make out lines and lines of writing on each one, a disorganized scrawl that made no sense and somehow made perfect sense, all at once. When she found the correct page, she set it down onto the table in the space between them with a flourish, a satisfied smile on her face.

"Read it," she said, obviously quite proud of herself. "Actually, now that I think about it, rip that whole page out and keep it for yourself. I don't want my mom and dad finding it if they decide to go snooping around in my stuff. You know, for signs of where they went wrong or something," added Robin with a roll of her eyes.

"What is it?"

"Your homework, Harrington," said Robin. "We need to commit this to memory as fast as we can. We need the progression to be subtle, not too rushed. But we can't be lazy with it, either. My parents obviously want me out of the house, so it has to happen—"

"—as soon as possible," Steve finished for her, nodding his head. "Yeah. But we've gotta make it seem realistic, too. So, how're we gonna pull *that* off?"

Pointing her index finger in the air, she answered, "I think that's where this story comes in. While we work on solidifying this, I start bringing you up in conversation with my parents — when they do acknowledge my presence, of course. Nothing gushy or over-the-top, just mentioning your name in passing. That way, you're in their minds, they know of you. And they'll have heard me mention you a lot, so it won't seem so out of nowhere. And then, when we're feeling

more confident, I confront them."

"Whoa whoa whoa," Steve interrupted, eyes widening in thinly-concealed shock. "*Confront* them? What the hell does *that* mean, exactly? If you piss them off, Robin, they'll never let you stay in Hawkins. Shouldn't you just, I don't know, try to lay low for as long as you can with this whole thing?"

Looking as unshaken as ever, Robin shrugged and said, "Relax! I don't mean *confront* like that. I mean, I'm going to fake-confess to them about you and me. You know, I'll turn on the waterworks, tell them about how *wrong* I was, what a *mistake* I made with Ellen," she said, with a melodramatic press of her hand to her forehead, imitating a swooning debutante. "If we play our cards right, if we pace this out, it *will* work, Steve. I can make them think that I was just some stupid teenager who didn't know what she wanted, and you're the golden, popular boy who helped me see the error of my ways and *changed* me."

All Steve could do was stare at her, dumbfounded. He wasn't going to lie . . . it was a great plan. "We could go even further than that," he said, energized by her enthusiasm, glad to have something to snowball off of. "Your mom and dad might go asking around, after all. We won't be able to fool *just* them, we'll have to fool *everybody*. Be seen together in public as much as possible," he added, careful to drop his voice so that any other restaurant-goers wouldn't be able to eavesdrop. "So, as of right now, as far as anyone's concerned . . . we met at Scoops Ahoy, started falling for each other over the summer, and . . . uh . . . "

"And you asked me out when we saw *Back to the Future*," Robin finished for him, beaming. "And I said yes. That's why we're working at Family Video together."

The more they talked about it, the more it seemed like this crazy scheme of theirs might actually work out. Steve's pulse hammered erratically in his veins; frankly, he was surprised his heart wasn't beating loud enough for everyone around him to hear its frantic drumbeat. He supposed it was pathetic, but this whole time, he had to admit, he'd rather doubted himself. He hadn't had a girlfriend since Nancy, after all, and he'd managed to mess that up pretty

terribly and completely for himself; any other girlfriend, even a fake girlfriend, might be subject to even more dumb mistakes on his part. More than anything, he wanted to do right by Robin, to make up for the fact that he'd gotten in the way of her longtime crush on Tammy Thompson. The least he could do would be to ensure that she could pursue future relationships without that interference.

Now that he thought about it, who better than he to contribute to this? After all, Steve knew all too well the ins and outs of how teenage relationships worked in this town. And, more importantly, he knew how word got around the fastest. And that was all it took to give him his next idea.

"Hey — if we really want everyone to believe us, I think I've got a plan," he said. "We need to start a rumor about us. Get other people talking about it before your parents ever even hear a thing about it. If more people in Hawkins know, that means your mom and dad have a chance of finding out about it from someone other than you."

"Which definitely makes it even more credible," Robin agreed, looking as though she were quickly catching on. An approving, thoughtful grin slowly meandered onto her features. "Nice initiative, Harrington, I like it — I never took you to be the conniving sort."

This time, it was Steve's turn to give a good-natured roll of his eyes. "Believe me, I just know way too much about this stuff. Personal experience and all that."

Still, the spark of adventurous humor never left Robin's gaze. "So, I think we have our first plan of action," she said at last, in a tone that brokered no room for argument. "We start a rumor. Now all that's left is to figure out what we tell . . . and to whom." She gave him a prompting, questioning gaze, as if to ask if there was anything he could think of to answer these questions.

And actually, he thought he might have an idea.

Who was the one person who had pushed from the beginning for Steve and Robin to be together? Who, in spite of his generally logic-driven personality, seemed to be a hopeless romantic at heart? Who was old enough to understand the impact of a new relationship in a

small town, but young enough to do anything but keep quiet when they heard news about it — *especially* when it turned out they were right about the two of them all along? Steve could think of only one kid — a kid who told his hotter-than-Phoebe-Cates-girlfriend everything — that fit that criteria.

So with a confident, amused little grin, he said, "I think I know a guy."